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ABSTRACT

Anne Fisher, a pioneer in British education, was one of the few females in the 18th century to publish a significant grammatical work, one that was used widely in classrooms. This paper highlights Anne Fisher's historic achievement and argues from the discipline of the history of rhetoric that the two verbal disciplines of rhetoric and grammar are nowhere near as distinct as some scholars have assumed. Noting that Fisher's grammar was published twice under a male pseudonym, the paper relates that she established her own school and focused on pedagogical and linguistic issues, not feminist questions. The paper looks at how Anne Fisher's success is related to how she used literacy training to conform to audience, teach style through syntax, and instruct in letter writing. Contains 10 references. (NKA)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Anne Fisher and 18th-Century Literacy Training

Anne Fisher is a pioneer in eighteenth-century British education. Anne Fisher was one of the few females in the eighteenth century to publish a significant grammatical work, one that was used widely in classrooms. I have two purposes. I want to highlight Anne Fisher's historic achievement, but I also want to argue from my own discipline of the history of rhetoric that the two verbal disciplines of rhetoric and grammar are nowhere near as distinct as some scholars have assumed. For instance, Fisher demonstrates a rhetorical awareness of audience in that she writes with a "male" voice--the only kind of voice which was accepted at the time. In this paper I propose to look at how Anne Fisher's success is related to how she used literacy training to conform to audience, teach style through syntax, and instruct in letter writing.

First of all, then, Anne Fisher conformed to audience expectations to achieve credibility. In Fisher's world females were considered inferior to males, therefore creating the need for her to have some sort of academic authority with male grammarians before they would accept her. She first had to face the centuries-old notion that females were thought to be not only mentally but also physically inadequate for learning academic material. This was, after all, a time when school meant long hours on hard benches, and physical stamina was a pedagogical issue. Women who were intelligent were even considered physically unattractive, as evidenced in Martin Luther's claim "'There is no gown nor garment that becomes a woman worse than when she will be wise.'" (McKnight 253). During Queen Elizabeth's reign women's intellect enjoyed a higher status, but when King James succeeded Elizabeth, the status of women again plummeted to inadequacy.

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James asked for sanctions against women who did not obey their husbands, even though women might be able to write Latin and Greek, the king asked whether they could spin (Thomas Wilson 1533, 54).

As an author and teacher, Fisher thus had to address a male audience who resisted female pedagogues. She achieved credibility by knowing this audience and its expectations. Females were allowed to learn only enough to stay within their social spheres, and going beyond those limits was morally reprehensible. Since grammar was a subject partially within those limits, grammar books helped regulate the moral identity of women. Those few grammar texts directed to females were patronizing in language because the authors assumed that females were weak and deficient, both mentally and physically. In 1524 Richard Hyrde cites from his translation of Vives's Instruction of a Christian Woman that women are "frail, and if they [are] disposed to the reading of Latin and Greek and the eloquence of writing it, they [can] easily fall to vice, upset their stomachs, and may become unstable" (167). Hyrde translated this edition from Juan Vives (1523). Fisher challenged this kind of position: "What is more fruitful than the good education and order of women, the one half of all mankind" (Vives 167). Fisher also appealed to the male assumption that women should educate children, especially in the home. If women's education is deficient, she argues, then children will also receive inadequate schooling at home. She achieves some credibility for women's ability to learn and teach in the way she appeals to her audience.

Fisher had to overcome such anti-feminine authorities as the late sixteenth-century grammarian Richard Mulcaster, who resisted females being educated. Because men governed, Mulcaster argued, they had exclusive rights to education, meaning that education was "framed for their use" and "most properly belonged to them" (18). Mulcaster concedes that men can, as a courtesy, educate women and that women have the intellectual capabilities to learn (51). He insists

that women should have not technical training because they do not need the same kind of knowledge that men do. He stresses that women should learn "within certain limits" because of the differences between men's and women's vocations. The vocational training of men is to be "without restriction either as regards subject-matter or method" (52-3). Women, however, have limited duties at home, and, therefore, their education must be also be limited. Mary Astell is an exception when we consider the education of women in the seventeenth century. She chose the difficult life a female intellectual, remained unmarried, fought for feminist rights (Smith 88-97). Fisher had to know how to work within these audience attitudes before she could accomplish anything in the schoolroom or in print.

Fisher, in the eighteenth century, was able to observe how a female from the seventeenth century addressed her audience to achieve credibility. Bathsua Makin, an author and educator, reacted to the injustice which was done to females when they were denied an equal education. She was one of the few authors to write about the education of women and one of the even fewer authors who was herself a woman. In the introduction to An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen (1674) Makin condemns the "barbarous custom to breed women low" and to believe that "women are not endued with such reason as men, nor capable of improvement by education." In this essay she writes anonymously in the persona of a man, thus explaining why her argument is, at times, more conservative than would be expected (Makin 3). In the guise of a man she tries to convince "his" supposed brothers that society would benefit from having their wives and daughters become educated, and that the men would not themselves be troubled by having educated wives and daughters. She argues in the guise that women are intellectually competent and that society suffers by not recognizing what women are capable of learning and accomplishing.

Anne Fisher was able to break through the barrier of a male-dominated academic world by knowing how to reach her audience. She achieved credibility by publishing her first book twice under a male pseudonym; finally she was able to place her own name, Anne Fisher, on the title page. Fisher had the advantage of being married to a bookseller and publisher. Even so, she was still able further to transcend the moral identity assigned to her as a female. She had her own school, and she wrote several textbooks. She published The New Grammar (1757) which later was retitled in the seventh edition (1762) A practical English Grammar. The last was such a popular text among village schoolmaster that it went through at least thirty-five editions by 1800, nearly one a year. Other popular books were The New English Tutor (1763), The Young Scholar's Delight (1770), New English Exercise Book (1770), and Fisher's Spelling Dictionary (1774; no known copy).

After Fisher had published two editions of her first book under a male name and once she had her own school, she is able to speak with authority to her male academic peers, but she was wise enough to speak as one belonging to the male academic fraternity. She focused on pedagogical and linguistic issues, not feminist questions. She knew how to reaches her audience by being productive, professional, and well informed. She was one of the first grammarians to make a definite statement about the parts of speech (Michael 182). Many grammarians in the eighteenth century made vague, passing statements about universal grammar, but they are usually subscribing to a particular kind of grammar such as Sheridan's rhetorical grammar. These grammarians acknowledged that languages of the world have strong similarities. Fisher, informed and outspoken, states in her grammar that the parts of speech are the same in all languages (preface 1753).

Fisher was a master at reaching and being accepted by her academic audience because she knew the issues being fought. Fisher argued from a linguistic and a rhetorical stance that Latin grammar was inadequate for teaching English grammar. She felt that if one were to be master of a language and write it with "Propriety and Exactness," one should not learn English grammar by means of Latin grammar (preface 1753). By the eighteenth century, many heated exchanges on the inadequacy of using Latin models to teach English were taking place in prefaces and introductions to grammar texts. She was welcomed into the linguistic camps by grammarians such John Clarke, Richard Johnson, and Michael Mattaire.

Second, Anne Fisher also demonstrated the interdependence of rhetoric and grammar by requiring students to learn style when they corrected false syntax. Her title page announces what she intends to do beginning with the 1750 edition of The New Grammar: to present "Examples of Bad English under all the Rules of Syntax." James Howell (1662) and Christopher Cooper (1685) had previously listed solecisms for correction, but these errors were in pronunciation, not in syntax. Fisher, in her grammar of 1749, incorporated some "exercises of false English" supplied by an anonymous teacher in Carlisle in imitation of those in Nathan Bailey's English and Latin Exercises (1706), and John Clarke's New Grammar of the Latin Tongue (1733), where faulty Latin had to be corrected. The modern grammarian and pedagogue recognizes what Fisher did not: that the exercises were ineffective for several reasons. First, the sentences demonstrated improbable but simple English: "Thou art the most wisest boy I ever saw." (1750, 129). Second, the sentences were improbable but incomprehensible English: "That Boys love play" (1750, 128). And third, the passage might be so full of errors that students and teacher would not catch all of them such as in the poem or hymn Fisher includes in the various editions. Fisher's false English exercises, however

did have some merit: they require some rhetorical skills to keep the relation between grammatical analysis and the study of style.

The practice of using bad exercises was immensely popular with schoolmasters, but by the end of the eighteenth century many teachers were objected on the grounds that the work only confused students. In the early nineteenth century grammars, such as Mark Anthony Meilan's An Introduction to the English Language (1803) claimed to have "an appendix containing Five Hundred Violations of Grammar." The practice, used widely during the rest of the 18th century and well into the nineteenth century, accomplished little because the mistakes were so improbable that no one speaking English would make those mistakes. What Fisher and other grammarians came to realize is that if a student is to learn from the exercises, the sentences have to be in a natural prose. Later grammarians could thank Fisher and other authors for working out this problem. Fisher improved her aim with subsequent editions: to have children sort out the mistakes, correct them, and improve their language skills from the stylistic merits of the passages.

The third point I want to make about Anne Fisher is that she teaches letter writing as a vocational skill to lower- and middle-class students. She is aware of social and vocational demands of the middle-class student, most significantly in their attaining letter-writing skills for the business community. To survive in the business world, tradesmen had to know the audience they addressed. Their credibility in their business fraternity depended much on how they presented themselves in letters. They not only needed the skill to explain what they were ordering or returning in goods, but they needed decorum. Fisher's pedagogy in A New Grammar (1749, 1757), addressed these vocational students by educating them in the proper way to write a letter. Like her male counterparts she recognizes the needs in the market place for both males and females to learn skills that will make them prosper in their vocations.

In the Early Modern period letter writing was one of the most common methods of teaching composition. Fisher begins by explaining that a "Tradesman's Letter should be plain, concise, and to the Purpose" (Fisher 1757, 151-52). It should be "free from stiff, or studied Expressions; always pertinent, and writ in such Words, or Terms, as carry a distinct Meaning with them." The person receiving the letter should not have the "least Hesitation or Doubt about the Meaning of any Words, Part, or Order, contained therein." Fisher also requires that all "Orders, Commissions, and material Circumstances of Trade" must be stated clearly and exactly. More importantly, "nothing should be presumed, understood, or implied in obscure or ambiguous Terms." The writer should also take care to answer all the questions addressed to him in the letter he has received. As for style, letters should be "neat, significant, and as concise as the Nature of the Subject will admit." Fisher says to "write to your Correspondent as you would talk to him, and without any formal uncommon Phrases." In letter-writing one must also be "frank and affable without Impertinence, obliging and complaisant without Bombast or Flattery." She reminds us that "nothing is more rude and unmannerly than to praise People to themselves."

Fisher not only outlines the kind of letter a tradesman is to write, she also describes the style he should have. She warns the writer never to "affect high or hard Terms," but to write to the intelligence of the specified audience. As for social restrictions, she advises the writer not to attempt to write letters of "Wit, Humour, or Railery...until you become Master of such good Sense" and "good Breeding." The writer needs to learn from "Reading" and "Experience" what is "Pure, Moral, or Polite" and what is "Gross, Immoral, or Impure." The writer does not want to use wit or satire on improper subjects and thus appear "surprisingly ridiculous." Fisher says that one must address the correspondent correctly, and she includes a chart that starts with royalty and moves down the social scale to servants and children.

Anne Fisher's success was due, in part, to her ability to teach grammar in terms of the larger context provided by rhetoric. She commanded the respect of her male peers because she could and did address them as fellow grammarians. Her innovative method of using false grammar made teachers and students much more aware of the connection between grammar and style. She also recognized the demands of the market place and taught letter-writing as an important vocational and social skill. Fisher is to be admired because she not only succeeded in a world where females were excluded but also for her canny understanding of the relation of rhetoric to grammar.

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